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The transformation of a barren strip of unused land to a hundred fish ponds teeming with fish may not just transform the lives of a hundred families

Give a man a fish, and he will eat for the day. Teach a man to fish, and he will eat for a lifetime.

In Nepalgunj, I saw the early vision of World Neighbours being brought to full-fledged life as again — open-mouthed — I witnessed a hundred fish ponds dug out in a few barren hectares 12 kilometres from Tribhuvan Chowk. The 100 is not hyperbole (hyperbole is a crime people often accuse me of), but a literal number. The fish ponds, each 20 by 20 by 2 meters long, are laid out next to each other in what appears to be a rather tiny plot of land. “This used to be barren land, used only for toilets,” says Pratima Rijal Limbu, one of the Education for Income Generation staff who shows me around the site. “Now there are a 100 fish ponds.” The Education for Income Generation in Nepal Program, funded by USAID, is implementing the ponds with support from the World Food Program (WFP).

The hundred fish ponds were dug by 700 laborers. They worked 40 days to finish the ponds. Each worker received four kilograms of rice per day through the auspices of the WFP's food for work program. The ponds, built on leased land, is owned by 100 individuals. The owners were decided collectively by two communities who chose the most vulnerable and marginalized people within their community to receive this benefit. The owners who've showed up to tell us about the program are mostly Dalits — Chamar, Cori, Khatik, Parsi, BK. They all look overworked and undernourished. As landless laborers, they spend their days seeking wage labour when the WFP's food supplement ends. With ongoing strikes and bandas disrupting daily work and wages, and blocking access to markets, they often skip meals and eat irregularly to cope with the ongoing insecurity. Soaring food prices have made even basic staples like lentils out of range for people who survive on a day-to-day basis, let alone more expensive sources of

protein like meat.

But hope is at hand. In just a few months, each owner will have a fish pond teeming with new fish. Wells will soon bore ground water, which will fill the ponds. By July, the ponds will be filled with “fingerlings” — recently hatched grass carp, silver carp and one other kind, all three carefully chosen so they are mixed and matched to eat both the grass and vegetation that grows on the surface of the water, along with the bugs at the bottom. Because the fishery owners lack refrigeration, the fish experts attached to the project have timed it so the fingerlings are introduced in a controlled, week by week fashion, so they don't all mature at the same time, thereby avoiding a fish-glut on the market at the same time. The fish will get fat just in time for Dashain's big festival rush. The ponds will give the owners an extra 25,000 rupees a year — a crucial cushion to provide everything from children's education to healthcare to start-up funds for new businesses.

Nepalgunj, which the ever-popular Candy of Traveler's Lodge Hotel candidly terms a “black hole where entrepreneurship doesn't exist”, may soon be seeing a shift in the way it views itself. Rather than being dependent on India — currently truckloads of fish make their way across the border from India to fulfill Nepalgunj's local fish demands — the city may soon see itself providing its own fresh fish to its people. The 100 fish ponds may actually only fulfill a tiny segment of demand. Another 100 fish ponds are already constructed in Bardiya, and 200 more are planned in conjunction with WFP in the upcoming months.

What is startling about the project is not just the scale of it. This may be the first time a hundred fish ponds were built together on the same plot of land. While the intensified productive use of the five hectares is already impressive, what is reconfigured is the land equation. I often wonder why the Tarai, the fecund breadbasket of Nepal, seems to teem with undernourished people. Why does the land itself look barren in places? The answer is simple — much of the land in the Tarai is owned by absentee landlords who live in Kathmandu or some other big city and have no interest or intention to cultivate the land. They hold on to it because it's prestigious to own land, but since they don't depend upon it, they do not use it to its full productive capacity. Consequently, people who have farmed the land for generation but who may only be sharecroppers or even bonded laborers, get sub-par yields from the land.

The fish-ponds are brilliant in that they solve two of Nepal's most pressing issues. Landless people end up having access to land through a leasing system — currently they pay Rs.500 per fishpond to the landlords each year for five years. And after five years? “Five years is a long time,” says Bhanumati Gupta. “We can buy our own land after five years.” Even to dream of this possibility is a shift in land relationships in Nepal. Entrepreneurship and the resulting income

fulfills the revolutionary vision of land ownership for landless people without having to resort to the easy and violent methods of land seizure from private owners. The free market, and entrepreneurship, will soon equalize those who are productive from those who are not.

And secondly, the ponds provide a livelihood that does not just feed people for a day, but for an entire lifetime. The proud owners, both men and women, who currently suffer not just from the ongoing high food prices but also the politically unstable regime which makes it difficult to get food on a day to day basis, may soon have a source of food and income that will feed not just themselves, but their entire families.

The transformation of a barren strip of unused land to a hundred fish ponds teeming with fish may not just transform the lives of a hundred families. It will also transform the markets of Nepalgunj and the buying habits of Nepalis who realize that fresh produce grown in Nepal is better than week-old fish laid on ice and trucked across the border from India. And more than that, it may transform the economy of Nepal, which sees itself only as a barren and unproductive country but doesn't realize the potential it has to take its marginalized communities and its unused land and multiply it a hundred times for the economic benefit of the whole nation.

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